

The Myth of Oedipus

Oedipus, Son of Laius and Jocasta

Oedipus is one of the most important and famous figures in Greek mythology. He was the son of Laius, King of Thebes. When Amphion and Zethus* gained possession of Thebes, Laius had taken refuge with Pelops, but had repaid his kindness by kidnapping his son Chrysippus, thereby bringing a curse on his own family. Laius recovered his kingdom after the death of Amphion and Zethus, and married Jocasta, but was warned by Apollo that his own son by Jocasta would kill him. In order to escape death at the hands of his son, Laius had the child, Oedipus, exposed on Mt. Cithaeron with a spike driven through the child's feet. There the child was discovered by a shepherd who took it to Polybus, King of Corinth, and Merope his Queen, who brought up the child as their own son. Later, being taunted with being no true son of Polybus, Oedipus enquired of the Delphic Oracle about his parentage, but was only told that he would kill his own father and get married to his own mother.

Killed His Father and Married His Mother in Ignorance

Thinking that this prophecy referred to Polybus and Merope, Oedipus determined never to see Corinth again. At a place where three roads met, he encountered Laius whom he did not know, and was ordered to make way. A quarrel followed, in which Oedipus killed Laius, thus fulfilling the first part of the prophecy but without realising the identity of the man he had killed. He then went on to Thebes, which was at that time suffering great misfortunes at the hands of a monster called the Sphinx who asked people riddles and killed those who could not give the correct answers. As the monster's riddles could not be answered by anyone, all those entering the city were being killed by it. Creon, brother of Jocasta and regent of Thebes, offered the kingdom and Jocasta's hand to whoever should rid the country of the monster. Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx and thus became the King of Thebes and married Jocasta (his own mother) without knowing who she really was.

Oedipus Blinded Himself

Oedipus and Jocasta had two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, and two daughters, Ismene and Antigone. At last in a time of famine and pestilence,

* Amphion and Zethus were sons of Antiope by Zeus. On becoming rulers of Thebes, they built the walls of the city, Amphion using his musical powers to draw stones into their places. Amphion married Niobe, while Zethus married the nymph Thebe, whence was derived the name of Thebes.

the Oracle announced that these disasters could be averted only if the slayer of Laius were expelled from the city. Oedipus thereupon started a search for the man who had killed Laius. The result was to establish that he himself was Laius's son and also his murderer. On this discovery, Jocasta, finding that she had been married to her own son, hanged herself* while Oedipus blinded himself. Oedipus was removed from the throne and banished.

His Two Sons and How they Died

Attended by his daughter Antigone, he wandered to Colonus in Attica, where he was protected by Theseus and where he met his end. According to another version, Oedipus remained shut up in Thebes. His sons having given him cause for displeasure, he put a curse on them that they should die by each other's hand. When they succeeded to the throne, on the deposition of Oedipus, they agreed to divide the inheritance, ruling in alternate years. But Eteocles, who ruled first, refused to make way for Polynices when his year of kingship ended. Polynices had spent his year of absence from Thebes at the court of Adrastus, King of Argos, and had married his daughter. Adrastus now assembled an army to support the claims of his son-in-law. The army was headed by seven champions, the famous "Seven against Thebes." To each of the seven champions was allotted one of the gates of Thebes to attack, while Eteocles likewise entrusted a Theban warrior to defend each gate. The invading army suffered a heavy defeat. Eteocles engaged in a combat with his brother Polynices, and the two killed each other. Creon, now King of Thebes, ordered that the bodies of the enemies and particularly that of Polynices should be refused burial. (This was a grave punishment, for unless buried, the dead could not enter Hades, the kingdom of death).

The Tragedy of Antigone, a Daughter of Oedipus

What followed is variously told. One version is that given by Euripides in his play, the *Suppliants*. Another version is that Antigone, rebelling against Creon's decree, managed secretly to perform the rites of burial over her brother. For this she was placed alive by Creon's order in a sepulchre, even though she was betrothed to his son Haemon, and there she killed herself while Haemon stabbed himself beside her dead body. This is the version in the *Antigone* of Sophocles. (According to yet another version, Antigone, detected in the act of cremating her brother's dead body at night, was handed over by Creon to Haemon to be killed. But Haemon hid her in a shepherd's hut and pretended that he had killed her. Later, their son, having come to Thebes for a festival, was recognised by a birthmark common to all his family. To escape from Creon's vengeance, Haemon and Antigone killed themselves or perhaps were saved by divine intervention).

* According to another version, Jocasta killed herself not at this stage, but later over the dead bodies of her sons, Eteocles and Polynices.

Oedipus Rex—An Introduction

Oedipus Rex, produced by Sophocles in the maturity of his powers, is his masterpiece. Aristotle also regarded this play as Sophocles's best and he frequently referred to it as the perfect type of tragic composition. Its greatness lies in the combination of a faultlessly-constructed plot with the profoundest insight into human motive and circumstance. It is the story of the impact of a totally undeserved misfortune upon a man of no exceptional faults or virtues. It reveals, with a merciless sincerity, the pitfalls lying about the path of a man into which those very unexceptional faults or virtues may at a touch overbalance him, at the bidding of some incalculable chance, and out of which he must raise himself by the greatness of his soul which alone makes him a match for the eternal powers. The story has its religious and anthropological implications. But the average reader is more interested in the more universal human issues of the drama. Oedipus is too complacent in his prosperity, too confident of his sufficiency, too ready to take offence or to impute blame when upset by the approach of trouble. Oedipus is unshirking in the performance of a self-appointed unpleasant task, and he is unflinching in quest of the truth at whatever cost of terrible self-revelation. Oedipus is driven to the summit of passion by the agony of body and soul, and returns at last to humility and selfless resignation. This vast and living portrait of a man, surrounded by a group of subsidiary figure no less vital, has no equal in the Greek, or in any other theatre. The chorus, fellow-citizens desperately concerned in the awful happenings, are closely tied to the action and their moods move swiftly with the march of events. Bewildered and apprehensive, they have little respite for calm reflection or reasoned judgment, and even their final words seem only to deepen the hopeless gloom. The moral they would draw for us is implied rather than stated in their moods of apprehension lest divine law should after all be found wanting, and a lurking spirit of defiance be justified by the event. This worst calamity at least is averted.

Oedipus Rex has been thought to be a "marvel of construction"*, and its plot has thus been analyzed:

Act I**

The arrival of an oracle about the plague in Thebes commanding the banishment of the unknown murderer of the late King Laius.

* The phrase is used by F.L. Lucas.

** Greek tragedies were not, of course, divided into Acts. The division into Acts in this case has been attempted only for the sake of convenience.

Act II

Oedipus, in the course of his investigation of the murder, quarrels with Teiresias, the true servant of the gods.

Act III

Hot-tempered and suspicious, Oedipus quarrels also with Creon, the true servant of the State.

Act IV

A messenger comes from Corinth. Jocasta realizes the truth and goes to hang herself. Oedipus, misunderstanding the situation, persists in his inquiry, and the Chorus rashly exults in the hope of discovering that some great, perhaps divine, parentage is his.

Act V

Owing to the revelations of the messenger, a shepherd is brought from Cithaeron. Oedipus in his turn realizes the truth—that he is the son of Laius and Jocasta—and rushes out to blind himself.

A Play About Human Greatness As Well As About the Insecurity of the Human Condition

Oedipus Rex is undoubtedly a play about the blindness of man and the desperate insecurity of the human condition. In a sense every man must grope in the dark as Oedipus gropes, not knowing who he is or what he has to suffer. We all live in a world of appearances which hide from us dreadful realities which we know not of. But surely *Oedipus Rex* is also a play about human greatness. Oedipus is great, not because of a great worldly position but because of his inner strength. He has the strength to pursue the truth as whatever personal cost, and he has the strength to accept and endure it when found. "This horror is mine," he cries, "and none but I is strong enough to bear it." Oedipus is great because he accepts the responsibility for all his acts, including those which are objectively horrible, though subjectively innocent.

Oedipus, a Symbol of the Human Intelligence

Oedipus is a kind of symbol of the human intelligence which cannot rest until it has solved all the riddles, even the last riddle to which the answer is that human happiness is built on an illusion. Sophocles does seem, in the last line of the play, to generalize the case; he does appear to suggest that in some sense Oedipus is every man and that every man is potentially Oedipus. In this matter Sophocles's view did not change. Whether this vision of man's condition (namely that all man living are but appearance or unsubstantial shadow) is true or false, it ought to be comprehensible to a generation which relishes the plays of Samuel Beckett. This view may not be a "message" but it certainly tends to an "enlargement of our sensibility."

Freud's Interpretation

Freud interpreted the play in a specific psychological sense: "Oedipus's fate," says Freud, "moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before birth the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses towards our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence towards our fathers; our dreams convince us that we were."

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Oedipus Rex—(or, “*Oedipus The King*”): A Summary of the Play

An Appeal to Oedipus for Help in the Midst of the Misfortunes that have Befallen the People of Thebes

Oedipus, King of Thebes, comes out of his palace to meet a group of Theban citizens led by a priest of Zeus. Oedipus asks these people what has brought them to him and why the air is so full of hymns and prayers and lamentations. Addressing the Priest in particular, Oedipus asks him to explain what misfortunes have brought these people to him. The Priest replies that these are not the only people praying to the gods and giving expression to their wretched condition. A large number of other citizens have gathered in the market-place and near Athene's temple where they are kneeling in prayer, hoping to get some relief in their troubles. The Priest goes on to tell Oedipus that the city has been overtaken by a great disaster; the land has become barren; the herds of sheep are hungry upon the pastures which used to be green; the women of the city are giving birth to dead children; people are dying, in large numbers, of the plague. The Priest then appeals to Oedipus to come to the help of his subjects. Oedipus is certainly no god, says the Priest, but he is wiser than all other men; he can read the riddles of life and the mysterious ways of heaven because it was he who had saved the city from the cruel and bloodthirsty Sphinx. It is the duty of Oedipus to save his people so that the impression which people have of him as a noble, mighty, and wise man should not be nullified because of his inaction. The city looks upon him as its saviour; let it not be thought that, under his Kingship, the city first rose from ruin and then to ruin fell again.

Creon Sent to Delphi to Seek the Guidance of Phoebus (or Apollo)

Oedipus replies that he is aware of the cruel sufferings his people are undergoing. He himself may not be sick but he is suffering a greater torture on account of the sufferings of his people than they themselves are suffering. Each citizen is suffering as a single individual; but he, Oedipus, bears the weight of the collective suffering of all of them. He has been shedding many tears on their account. He has even been looking for a remedy. He has sent Creon, his wife's brother, to Delphi to find out from Apollo's oracle there the reason for the sufferings of the Theban people and the method by which they can be delivered of those sufferings. Creon left for Delphi many days ago but has not yet returned. On his return, says Oedipus, the method proposed by the oracle will promptly be adopted to relieve the sufferings of the people.

The Circumstances of the Murder of King Laius

Just at this time Creon arrives. He had sought the guidance of the oracle of Delphi and has now brought the information for which Oedipus has anxiously been waiting in order to know how the sufferings of his people can be relieved. Creon tells Oedipus that, according to the Delphic oracle, all the sufferings of the people are due to the presence in their midst of the man who had murdered Laius who was the ruler of the city before Oedipus was enthroned as the King. The murder of Laius must be avenged before people can expect any relief in their sufferings. As Oedipus is not aware of the circumstances which prevailed in the city before he became its King, he asks Creon who murdered King Laius and how. Creon gives a brief description of the circumstances in which King Laius was killed. King Laius had left the city in the company of a few attendants on a religious journey and had never come back home again. A single survivor from the King Laius's party had returned to the city and said that the King and his companions had fallen in with brigands who had killed not only the King but his companions also. Oedipus asks how brigands would dare to attack the King unless they were bribed by enemies within the city. Creon replies that no inquiry had been held into the murder because the city was pre-occupied with a grave problem that had been troubling all the people. This problem had been created by the Sphinx whose riddle nobody was able to solve with the result that the people were groaning under the weight of the affliction caused to them by the Sphinx. It was only Oedipus who had solved the riddle and thus rescued the city from the clutches of the Sphinx. Laius having been killed, reportedly by brigands, the people had made Oedipus their King and offered their widowed Queen to him as his wife.

Oedipus to Avenge the Murder of Laius

On hearing all these facts. Oedipus replies that he will start an investigation into the murder of Laius and that he will find out the truth. Oedipus declares that he will avenge the murder of Laius on behalf of the people of Thebes and on behalf of Phoebus. In avenging this murder, Oedipus will not only remove the stigma from the city but also protect himself because the murderer of Laius could very well try to murder Oedipus also.

The Song Sung by the Chorus

The declaration of the King satisfies the Priest who then withdraws in the company of the citizens who had come with him to submit their petition to the King. Creon also leaves. Only Oedipus remains behind and the Chorus representing the citizens of Thebes enter singing. The song sung by the Chorus is a kind of invocation. The Chorus appeals to Athene, Artemis, and Apollo to protect the people of Thebes, as they used to protect them in the past. The woes which the people are suffering cannot be counted. There is no defence against the destruction which is going on in the city. The fertile soil has become unproductive. Women suffer pain and are giving birth to dead

children. People are dying in large numbers. The dead bodies of those who perish remain lying on the ground unburied, infecting the air with deadly pollution. Young wives and aged mothers go to the altars and cry aloud in prayer. The terrible cry of the fierce god of war rings in the ears of the people, and this is an indication that war might soon begin and cause further destruction. The song ends with a prayer to Apollo, Artemis, and Bacchus to come to the rescue of the city of Thebes and save the people.

Oedipus's Curse Upon the Murderer

When the Chorus have completed their song, Oedipus says that the sufferings of the city can be ended if the members of the Chorus co-operate with him. Oedipus reminds the members of the Chorus that years ago he had come to the city as a complete foreigner and that it was only afterwards that he became a Theban among Thebans. When he came first, he did not know anything about the murder of Laius, and even now he has no clue to that murder. However, he now wishes to proclaim the whole city that he is bent upon avenging the murder. Let the murderer come forward and confess his crime. The murderer need have no fear; no punishment will be awarded to him except banishment from the city. If any citizen brings information about the identity of the murderer, he will be rewarded and will, besides, earn the King's gratitude. If any citizen is harbouring the murderer in his house, let him take this warning and speedily drive out the murderer from his home because it is the presence of the murderer which is responsible for the plague raging in the city. Oedipus then goes on to utter a curse upon the man who murdered Laius; the murderer will find nothing but wretchedness and misery as long as he lives; if the murderer is intentionally given shelter by Oedipus himself, let the same curse descend upon Oedipus. It would have been Oedipus's duty, the King goes on to say, to avenge the murder of Laius even if the command had not come from Phoebus. Now it is doubly his duty, and he will leave nothing undone to find the man who killed Laius. On those who disobey, Oedipus invokes another curse. May their fields become utterly barren and their wives be rendered incapable of bearing any children, and may the present plague, and a pestilence worse than the present one, destroy them! Oedipus completes his speech with a prayer for the welfare of the Chorus: "May justice and all the gods always help you!"

Teiresias Sent for at Creon's Advice

The Chorus-Leader now speaks. He says that he did not kill Laius and that he is ignorant of the identity of the killer. Since Phoebus has imported the task of revenge upon the city, Phoebus should also name the murderer. Oedipus says that there is no force by which human beings can compel the gods or do or say anything against their own will. Phoebus has not chosen to name the murderer of Laius. The Chorus-Leader thereupon suggests that the prophet Teiresias should be consulted in the matter because Teiresias has the power to read the mind of Apollo. Oedipus replies that he has not ignored

even this possibility. Acting upon Creon's advice he has already sent two messengers to Teiresias. Strangely enough, Teiresias has not yet come in response to the summons.

Oedipus and Teiresias

Just then the blind Teiresias arrives, led by a boy. The Chorus-Leader draws Oedipus's attention to the prophet's arrival, saying that Teiresias is divinely inspired and that he is the only man whose heart contains the truth. Oedipus turns to Teiresias and, speaking most respectfully, says that only he can save the city from the plague. The plague will never cease unless the murderer of Laius is discovered and punished with either death or banishment. Oedipus appeals to Teiresias to exercise his powers of divination and give him the name and identity of the murderer. Teiresias replies that he should not have come in response to Oedipus's call. Knowledge becomes a great weight upon the mind if that knowledge can be of no avail. Teiresias says that he would like to go back home and that such a course will be best not only for himself but also for Oedipus. Oedipus points out that, if Teiresias does not reveal the truth of which he is aware, he will prove disloyal to the city where he was born. Oedipus makes another humble appeal to Teiresias to tell him the truth. Teiresias, however, declines to unburden his mind of the knowledge that he possesses. Oedipus now loses his temper. He asks if Teiresias would like to see the city ruined and all the inhabitants killed, and if he can prove so hard-hearted and rigid. Oedipus's tone of humility is now gone. He calls Teiresias a villain for treating people with such cold disdain. Teiresias persists in his refusal regardless of Oedipus's anger and rage. Thereupon Oedipus, losing all self-control, asserts that the murder of Laius must have been planned by Teiresias himself and that Teiresias, being blind, must have used someone else for the actual murder. Teiresias thereupon says that Oedipus himself is the man whose crimes pollute the city and that, for this reason, he should submit to the punishment which he has announced for the culprit. Oedipus is shocked by the accusation and can never believe it. But Teiresias repeats the accusation, adding that Oedipus is leading a horrible life of shame with those nearest and dearest to him. Oedipus threatens Teiresias with dire consequences for trying to defame him, but Teiresias says that he has spoken nothing but the truth. Oedipus expresses the suspicion that Teiresias is in league with Creon and that they have both hatched a conspiracy against him. Oedipus laments that Creon, in whom he had reposed full trust, has become hostile to him and has entered into a shameful agreement with Teiresias whom he calls a crafty schemer and a mountebank, and who, in Oedipus's opinion, is not only blind by sight but also by brains. Oedipus taunts Teiresias on the latter's failure to have solved the riddle of the Sphinx, adding that it was he, Oedipus, who had solved the riddle thus getting rid of the Sphinx and saving the people of Thebes. Oedipus warns Teiresias that he will teach him a lesson for his treason. At this point the Chorus-Leader intervenes and tries to pacify Oedipus, saying that it is more important to

carry out the task that Phoebus has laid upon him. Teiresias claims the right to give a reply to what Oedipus has said. Teiresias then angrily denies the charge that he is in league with Creon. Teiresias next rebukes Oedipus for having taunted him with blindness. Oedipus may be having eyes in the physical sense, says Teiresias, but Oedipus is unable to see the facts. Teiresias accuses Oedipus of being ignorant of the identity of his parents. Teiresias warns Oedipus that he will be driven out of Thebes, that he will be deprived of his eyesight, that he will utter cries of agony on learning the real significance of his marriage, and that he will find himself one with his own children. Teiresias's words naturally enrage Oedipus and, in a state of fury, he shouts to the prophet to get out of his sight at once. Teiresias says that he seems to be a fool to Oedipus but that he was regarded as wise by Oedipus's parents. Oedipus asks who his parents were. Teiresias replies that this very day will unfold the secret of his birth and his destruction. Oedipus says that Teiresias is talking riddles, but Teiresias replies that Oedipus, who is proud of his talent for solving riddles, should have no difficulty in understanding him. Oedipus says that he has nothing but contempt for Teiresias; and he boasts of the talent by means of which he had won glory. Oedipus then once again shouts to Teiresias to leave. Teiresias says that he will go only when he has had his say and that he is not in the least scared of Oedipus. Teiresias then goes on to complete what he had to say. According to Teiresias, the man for whom Oedipus is searching, namely the murderer of Laius, is living in the city itself; the murderer shall be found to be a Theban by birth even though he is at present regarded as a foreigner; the murderer will be forced to depart from the city, with his eyesight turned to blindness and his wealth to beggary, and he will take his children with him; the murderer will find himself to be the brother of his own children and the son of the very woman whom he now calls his wife. Teiresias then bids Oedipus to go and think over all this. Only if his statements prove to be false, will Oedipus be justified in thinking Teiresias to be lacking in the power of divination.

A Choral Song

When both Teiresias and Oedipus have withdrawn, the Chorus sings its next song. The Chorus calls upon the murderer of Laius to flee from the city without delay because Phoebus has denounced him and because the Furies, whose function it is to punish crime, must already be active in their chase of the murderer. Apollo's threat will hang upon the criminal's head and descend upon him. Let every Theban join the search for the criminal. But the Chorus would like to know the meaning of the words spoken by Teiresias. The Chorus is puzzled by what Teiresias has said. There is no strife between the Kings of Thebes and Corinth. An unknown hand killed Laius who was then the King of Thebes. Zeus and Apollo know the true facts. As for human beings, they will only believe what can be proved. How can Oedipus be regarded as the murderer of Laius, as has been alleged by Teiresias? Oedipus proved his wisdom by defeating the Sphinx and saving the city. How can he be accused of the murder of Laius?

Oedipus and Creon

Creon now enters. He has just heard of the accusation made against him by Oedipus in his conversation with Teiresias. He tells the Chorus that he has never said or done anything to harm Oedipus and that Oedipus's accusation was most unjust. The Chorus-Leader replies that the accusation was probably the result of anger and not of a well-considered judgment. At this point Oedipus re-enters. Seeing Creon, Oedipus becomes indignant and asks how Creon dared to come here when it has clearly been proved that he has tried to take Oedipus's life and steal his crown. Oedipus says that he has come to know of Creon's conspiracy against him, and that Creon must be having the support of some others in the city. Creon tries to defend himself, denying all these accusations, but Oedipus is so convinced of Creon's villainy that he is not willing to listen to him. Creon asserts that, when he has no knowledge of a matter, he does not speak about it. Oedipus says that he sent for Teiresias at Creon's advice and that the prophet has now accused him, Oedipus, of the murder of Laius, thereby proving that Creon was hand in glove with the prophet who had been instigated by Creon to bring a fantastic charge against Oedipus. Oedipus calls Creon a traitor. Creon now gets an opportunity to speak in defence of himself. He says that he never felt a desire to become the King of Thebes. Kingship only creates fears in the mind of a man and gives him sleepless nights. Being very close to Oedipus, Creon has been wielding great influence in the city. He would not like to lose his present position in order to become the King and lead a life of high responsibility and ceaseless anxiety. Nothing is farther from his thoughts than the wish to become the King. If he had been a traitor, he would not have truthfully reported the information he got from the Delphic oracle. It is, therefore, highly unjust on the part of Oedipus to discard a loyal supporter like Creon. Creon's statement in defence of himself is reinforced by the Chorus-Leader who points out to Oedipus that hasty judgment is not desirable. But Oedipus is in no mood to pay any heed either to Creon or to the Chorus-Leader. He says that he must be prompt in meeting an attack from the enemy and that no hasty judgment is involved here. Creon asks if Oedipus wants to banish him from Thebes. Oedipus replies that banishment would not be enough and that he would sentence Creon to death. Creon asks if Oedipus must be stubborn and if he really does not believe him. Oedipus again calls him a traitor. The Chorus-Leader again tries to intervene in the dispute. Just then Jocasta, the Queen, appears on the scene.

The Intervention of Jocasta and of the Chorus on Creon's Behalf

Jocasta is very upset by the dispute between her husband and her brother, and the hot words they have exchanged. She asks both of them to feel ashamed of indulging in private quarrels when the city is afflicted by the plague. Creon replies that Oedipus has decided either to banish him from Thebes or to sentence him to death. Oedipus tells Jocasta that her brother had secretly plotted against his life. Creon pleads his innocence. Jocasta appeals

to Oedipus to believe Creon's words and to respect the oath of allegiance Creon had taken. The Chorus now joins Jocasta in defending Creon. The Chorus calls upon Oedipus to show due respect to Creon who is bound by an oath to remain loyal to the King. Oedipus replies that, if he spares the life of Creon, it will mean either banishment or death for Oedipus himself. The Chorus swears that it has no such wish regarding Oedipus. The Chorus appeals to Oedipus not to add another misfortune to Thebes which is already afflicted with plague. In response to the appeal of the Chorus, Oedipus softens. He pardons Creon but declares that Creon will have his lasting hatred. His pardon of Creon might endanger his own life, says Oedipus, but he would not like to reject the appeal of the Chorus. Creon says that Oedipus's pardon has been granted in an unwilling and ungenerous manner. Creon adds that, when Oedipus's anger has cooled, he will realise the injustice of the action he had wanted to take against him. But Oedipus remains unconvinced and he orders Creon to get out of his sight.

Oedipus and the Chorus

Creon withdraws, and the Chorus asks Jocasta to take the King inside the palace with her. Jocasta says that she would like to know what had happened. The Chorus replies that the quarrel arose from a suspicion and that random words, undeserved, were spoken. Jocasta asks if both the men had spoken in anger. The Chorus says "yes" to this question and then suggests that the matter should be allowed to rest here. Oedipus complains that the advice of the Chorus had blunted his wrath and prevented him from taking action against Creon. The Chorus-Leader repeats that he had absolutely no wish to upset or defeat the King's plan and that he had no intention at all to do any harm to the King. The King had saved Thebes at a crucial time, and now his guidance is again needed because of another crisis.

Jocasta's Disbelief in Oracles, and the Dawning of a Suspicion in Oedipus's Mind

Jocasta asks her husband to tell her, in the name of Heaven, the reason why he became enraged. Oedipus tells her that her brother Creon had plotted against his life and that he had used a crafty prophet, namely Teiresias, as a tool to accuse him of being the murderer of Laius. Jocasta advises her husband not to feel afraid of any prophecies because what the prophets say has no bearing upon human life at all. She says that she knows from personal experience that the so-called power of prophecy is something imaginary. She goes on to relate her personal experience. An oracle once came to Laius and prophesied that he would have a son by her, namely Jocasta, and that the son would kill his father, namely Laius. But later events had proved the falsehood of that prophecy because Laius had been killed by strangers, by brigands, at a place where three roads met. As for the child that was born of Laius's union with her, it was hardly three days old when Laius fastened both its feet together and ordered it to be exposed over a precipice in order that it might

die. Thus the prophecy uttered by Apollo's oracle had failed, because Laius's son did not kill his father.

Jocasta's Account of Laius's Death and Oedipus's Desire to see the Survivor (the Theban Shepherd)

On hearing this account, Oedipus is shaken by terror. He remembers that he had killed not one but several persons at a place where three roads met. It occurs to him that one of the men killed by him might have been Laius. Oedipus asks Jocasta what Laius had looked like. Jocasta replies that Laius was a tall man with some gray patches in his hair and that in his appearance he had greatly resembled Oedipus. Oedipus is now scared to think that he himself might be the man who had murdered Laius, in which case the curse that he had uttered against the murderer would descend upon himself. There seems to be some truth after all in what the blind prophet had said a while ago. Oedipus asks Jocasta whether Laius was alone at the time of his death or was attended by his bodyguard. Jocasta says that the King was accompanied by four attendants including a herald. She also says that only one of the five had survived, that the survivor had come back to Thebes with the information of Laius's murder, and that he had immediately afterwards left the palace with her permission to become a shepherd in the country. Oedipus finds that the facts as stated by Jocasta tally with his own recollection of the incident. He had encountered a royal party, had got involved in a fight with them, and had killed them all except one, though he did not know the identity of any of them. Oedipus, seeking further confirmation of the facts, expresses a strong desire to see the man who had survived. Jocasta says that she would send him a message and summon him.

Oedipus's Account of His Life to Jocasta

On being asked by Jocasta what is troubling him, Oedipus tells her the circumstances of his past life. His father, he says, was Polybus, King of Corinth and his mother, Merope, the Queen of Corinth. One day a drunken man had said at a banquet that Oedipus was not the son of King Polybus. This remark had hurt Oedipus and he had reported it to his parents who dismissed it as a lie. But somehow this slanderous remark gained currency and mentally disturbed him. Without telling his parents, Oedipus went secretly to Delphi and asked the oracle who his parents were. The oracle, instead of answering this question, prophesied that Oedipus would murder his father and marry his mother who would bear children by him. This horrible prophecy had shocked Oedipus and, in order to prevent its fulfilment, he decided never to go back to his parents in Corinth. In the course of his aimless journeying, he arrived at the spot where three roads met and where, without any provocation by him, he got involved in a fight with a few travellers. In his rage he had killed nearly all the travellers. If one of the men killed on that occasion was Laius, who can be more unfortunate than Oedipus himself, in view of the fact that he had invoked a terrible curse on Laius's murderer? As a consequence of the

punishment pronounced by himself, Oedipus must now be ready to suffer exile from Thebes. At the same time, it is not possible for Oedipus to go back to his parents in Corinth, because there would still be the possibility of killing his father Polybus and marrying his mother Merope, as foretold by Apollo's oracle. It would be better for him to die than to incur the stigma of such a pollution.

An Interrogation of the Survivor Essential to Prove Either Oedipus's Innocence or his Guilt in the Matter of Laius's Murder

After hearing Oedipus's story of his life, Jocasta asks him what he expects to find out from the man who had survived the brawl that had occurred between Oedipus and Laius's party. Oedipus replies that there is still a possibility that he will be proved to be innocent of Laius's murder. The survivor had reported that Laius had been killed by brigands, that is, a group of men, and not a single man. Oedipus was all alone when he had encountered the travellers with whom he had fallen out. If the survivor still maintains that more than one person had attacked the King's party, then Oedipus would be proved to be not guilty of Laius's murder; but if the survivor says that a lone person had fought with the King's party, then the burden of the guilt would fall upon Oedipus himself. Jocasta assures him that the survivor had spoken not of a lone individual but of several men having attacked Laius's party. Not only she, but others had also heard the version of the encounter given by the survivor. Even if the survivor now modifies his version of the incident, it cannot be proved that Laius was murdered according to the prophecy. The oracle had said that Laius would be killed by his own son borne by Jocasta, but Laius was killed by someone else. Therefore, so far as divination or prophecy goes, she is not prepared to put her faith in it. Oedipus says that she is wise in her views but that he would still like to meet that Theban shepherd. Jocasta says that she will send for the fellow at once. Oedipus and Jocasta make their exit, leaving the Chorus behind.

The Chorus's Affirmation of Piety and Condemnation of Impiety

Another choral song now follows. The Chorus speaks of the divine laws created by Olympus, laws in the framing of which mortal men had no share. These laws are eternal because the god who created them never grows old. A tyrant, says the Chorus, grows unwise and loses self-restraint because of pride, pride of wealth and pride of power. Pride must ultimately lead to the destruction of the proud man. A proud man will find no escape from the doom that awaits him. May ruin descend upon the man who is proud in word or deed, who has no fear of justice, and who feels no reverence for holy shrines! No man who lays violent hands on sacred things can be safe from the anger of the gods. The Chorus ends its song by affirming its complete faith in the shrine of Apollo and in the temple of Zeus, and deploring the fact that people are losing their faith in the oracles and are moving towards a denial of Apollo's power.

Oedipus in the Grip of Fear; Jocasta's Worship of Apollo

Jocasta now reappears, attended by a girl carrying a wreath and some incense. Jocasta tells the members of the Chorus that she has come to the altar of Apollo in order to lay a wreath on it and to burn incense in token of her worship. Her husband, Oedipus, is feeling terrified by many things and she has failed to calm him. Jocasta then turns to the altar of Apollo and makes her offerings. She appeals to Apollo to grant peace to all the people. This peace is necessary in view of the fact that the King himself is in the grip of fear.

The Arrival of a Corinthian Shepherd

At this stage a stranger appears on the scene. He is a shepherd from Corinth and he asks whether he can meet King Oedipus. The Chorus-Leader introduces the newcomer to Jocasta who is still there after her worship. The Corinthian informs her that he has brought good news for her husband who is going to be invited by the people of Corinth to become their King. Jocasta asks what has happened to King Polybus. The Corinthian replies that Polybus has died. Jocasta immediately sends for her husband, at the same time making sarcastic remarks about the oracles. According to the prophecy, Polybus should have been killed by his son Oedipus, but Polybus has now been reported as being dead, while Oedipus has not at all moved out of Thebes.

The Oracle Declared Wrong by Jocasta

When, a moment later, Oedipus enters, Jocasta asks him to listen to the news brought by the Corinthian and to form his own conclusion whether there is any truth in prophecies. After hearing the news from the Corinthian's own lips, Oedipus comes to the same conclusion as Jocasta. The oracle has been proved wrong because Polybus has died a natural death. However, there is still the other half of the prophecy, namely, that Oedipus will marry his mother.

Jocasta's Philosophy

Jocasta tries to allay her husband's fear on this score also. According to her way of thinking, man is ruled by chance and there is no room for any prophecies. A man should live at random and live as best as he can. She urges him not to fear the possibility of his marrying his mother. Many men, she says, have married their mothers before, but only in their dreams. The best way to lead a peaceful life is to pay no heed to such a possibility.

Oedipus's Fears Baseless, According to the Corinthian

Oedipus says that he would have agreed with Jocasta if his mother had not been alive. But Jocasta's wisdom cannot help him as long as his mother lives. Jocasta tells him that he should draw comfort from his father's death because he had previously been feeling afraid of the possibility of his murdering his father. Oedipus replies that that much comfort he does have but the fear of marrying his mother still persists. The Corinthian at this point

intervenes, asking Oedipus the nature of his fears. Oedipus tells the Corinthian of the prophecy which had been uttered years ago by Apollo's oracle. The oracle had said that Oedipus would marry his own mother and defile his hands with the blood of his own father. To avoid this fate Oedipus had fled from Corinth many years before. The Corinthian says that if Oedipus's fears are only due to this prophecy, he should dismiss his fears because Oedipus is not the son of Polybus.

The Origins and Birth of Oedipus, Still a Mystery

The Corinthian explains that he himself had presented Oedipus, when the latter was only an infant, to Polybus and Merope who, being themselves childless, had adopted the infant. The Corinthian says that he had found the infant in the woods upon Mt. Cithaeron, where he used to work as a hired shepherd. He had found the infant with fetters clamped upon its feet and, for that reason, the child had been named "Oedipus". The Corinthian further says that actually the child had been given to him by another shepherd who had been serving in the employ of King Laius. Oedipus expresses a great anxiety to talk to the other shepherd, namely, the Theban shepherd who had been working for King Laius and who can, so Oedipus thinks, supply further information regarding Oedipus's origin and birth. The Chorus-Leader expresses the view that the Theban shepherd might be the very man who has already been sent for by Jocasta at Oedipus's request.

Jocasta's Grief on Learning the Truth

Oedipus asks Jocasta if the man sent for could be the same to whom the Corinthian had referred and who had handed over the child Oedipus to this Corinthian years ago. Jocasta has already understood the situation. It is clear to her that Oedipus is her own son, who, as a child, had been handed over to the Theban shepherd, to be exposed on Mt. Cithaeron and allowed to die in view of the oracle's prophecy that Laius's son by Jocasta would ultimately kill Laius. Jocasta now knows the grave crime that she has unknowingly committed by having married her own son. But she would like to spare Oedipus the agony of this knowledge. She, therefore, entreats him not to pursue his investigation into his parentage. But Oedipus misunderstands her intention. He thinks that she apprehends the possibility of his being found to be low-born. He, therefore, insists on seeing the Theban shepherd to know the truth. Jocasta leaves in a state of great wretchedness and misery. When the Chorus-Leader points out to Oedipus that Jocasta has gone away in a state of fear and grief, Oedipus still expresses the view that she is miserable at the thought that he is a man of humble origin. Oedipus calls himself the child of Fortune, with the Years as his kinsmen, and he says that he would not be ashamed if he finds that he is low-born.

The Hope Expressed by the Chorus

The Chorus now sings its next song. The Chorus says that Mt. Cithaeron would be honoured and worshipped for being the birth-place of Oedipus,

the great King of Thebes. The Chorus expresses the view that Oedipus, far from being low-born, is the offspring of the union of some god with a mountain-nymph. That is why Oedipus was found at such a deserted place as Mt. Cithaeron. Oedipus could be the son of the union of Polybus with a nymph or he might be the son of Apollo, or of Hermes, or of Dionysus.

The Theban Shepherd's Reluctant Disclosures

Now the Theban shepherd who had been summoned, appears on the scene. The Chorus-Leader recognises him as having been one of the most trusted shepherds in the service of King Laius. The Corinthian also recognises him as the man who had given the child to him. On the Theban shepherd's failure to recognise the Corinthian, the latter states certain facts relating to the past association of the two shepherds. The Corinthian then reminds the Theban shepherd of the baby that the latter had handed over to him. The Theban shepherd denies any knowledge of any such incident. Oedipus suspects the Theban shepherd of trying to hide something. He, therefore, threatens the Theban shepherd with serious consequences if he does not come out with the truth. The Theban shepherd still persists in his denial but, on being threatened with death, confesses that he had given the child to the Corinthian. On being further questioned by Oedipus, the Theban shepherd explains that the child had been given to him by Queen Jocasta who had wanted the child to be destroyed because of the prophecy that the child would kill its father. On being asked why he had then handed over the child to the Corinthian, the Theban shepherd replies that he had taken pity upon the child and, not wanting to destroy it, had handed it over to the Corinthian who could take it to his own country and allow it to live. Oedipus has at last discovered the secret of his parentage. He is the son of King Laius whom he had killed at the spot where three roads met, and he is the son of Queen Jocasta whom he had married and with whom he had lived as her husband for many years. The agony of Oedipus on learning the truth can only be imagined.

The Chorus's Lament

The Chorus now sings a song commenting upon the vicissitudes of human life. No man, says the Chorus, can win any real happiness. All human happiness is a shadow that quickly fades away. The fate of Oedipus is a clear illustration of this fact. Oedipus won great prosperity and wealth. By conquering the Sphinx, he had become the sovereign ruler of Thebes. But who in this world can now be more wretched and more afflicted with cruel misery than this very Oedipus? The life of Oedipus has been reduced to dust and ashes. What a monstrous crime he had committed by becoming the husband of the woman who had given him birth! Time sees everything. And time has punished the unnatural marriage of Oedipus with his mother. The Chorus laments the fact of ever having known such a man as Oedipus.

The Death of Jocasta, and the Self-blinding of Oedipus

A messenger from the palace now arrives with horrible news which he communicates to the members of the Chorus. The royal palace, says the messenger, has become the breeding-place of many evils. He then informs the Chorus that Queen Jocasta is dead. Having come to know the real identity of Oedipus, the Queen had felt crazy with grief. She ran across the courtyard of the palace tearing her hair with both her hands. She had gone into her chamber and shut the door. She had then called upon Laius and shouted that he had met his death at the hands of his own son and that she had afterwards got married to the same son. She had cried aloud upon the bed where she had given birth to a son with whom she had afterwards slept in the same bed as his wife. A little later Oedipus, also feeling miserable and grief-stricken, was seen wandering through the palace. He was calling for a sword and asking for the woman whom he had called his wife. Thus raving, he had forced his way into the Queen's chamber where he found her dead body hanging by a rope. On seeing this sight, Oedipus had groaned in misery and disengaged her body from the rope. He then snatched away the golden brooches from her dress and with their point struck his own eyes, crying aloud that he should never be able to see with those eyes what he had suffered and what he had done. He struck his eye-balls with the pins several times so that blood flowed from them profusely. The happiness which Oedipus and Jocasta had enjoyed for many years has ended in this dark tragedy. Their happiness has given way to shame, death, ruin, and lamentation.

Oedipus's Agony

The Chorus-Leader asks the messenger if there is any intermission in Oedipus's agony. The messenger replies that Oedipus shouted that the gates of the palace be opened and that the whole city be allowed to see the man who had killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus had also declared that he would no longer remain in Thebes because he had announced that the murderer of Laius would not be permitted to live in the city. Just then Oedipus himself is seen advancing slowly towards the Chorus.

Oedipus's Description of His Misery to the Chorus

The Chorus is shocked to see the horrible sight of Oedipus who is now blind and is groping to find his way. The Chorus-Leader shudders at the sight of Oedipus. Oedipus is bemoaning his fate and expressing his misery at having been crushed by Heaven. He is afflicted both by the pain of the blinding and the memory of the crimes he unknowingly committed. The Chorus-Leader says that the sight of Oedipus is too terrible to be seen and expresses his sympathy for the unfortunate man. Oedipus appreciates the words of sympathy spoken by the Chorus-Leader, saying that, though blind, he can recognise his sympathiser by his voice. The Chorus-Leader asks what had led Oedipus to blind himself. Oedipus replies that it was Apollo's decree that he should suffer but that the hand that blinded his eyes was his own. He

had blinded himself because there was for him now no sight worth seeing. The Chorus-Leader agrees. Oedipus says that he would like to be driven out from Thebes because he is "accursed" and, what is more, because he is more hateful to Heaven than any body else. Oedipus curses the man who had removed the fetters from his feet and saved him from death when he was a child. If he had been allowed to die as a child, he would not have witnessed the great disaster; he would not then have slain his father and become the husband of the woman who had given him birth. Now he is God's enemy, because of the crimes he has committed. The woman who gave him birth also later on gave birth to children by him. If there is an evil surpassing all evils, that evil has come to Oedipus.

Reason for Blinding Himself

The Chorus-Leader says that Oedipus has not done the right thing by blinding himself because it would be better to be dead than to be blind. Oedipus thereupon gives his reasons for having robbed himself of his eyesight. He says that by killing himself he would have gone to Hades (or the realms of death) where he would have found himself face to face with the ghost of his father and the ghost of his mother. This horrible confrontation he wanted to avoid. Besides, death would not have been an adequate punishment for the crimes he has committed. If he had not rendered himself blind, he would have faced his children, and the sight of them would have been no pleasure to him, because these children were begotten of an unnatural union. Nor would there have been any pleasure for him to see this city, its walls, and its sacred statues. He is now forbidden to see the sights of the city by his own decree according to which the murderer of Laius was not to be allowed to stay on in Thebes. If it had been possible for him to block his ears and to render himself completely deaf to the sounds of the city, he would have done that also. It would have been more appropriate for him to have deprived himself of hearing as well as sight.

Oedipus's Lament

Oedipus then asks why Mt. Cithaeron had accepted him at all instead of letting him die as a child. Why had the King of Corinth brought him up? Why did he ever go to the spot where three roads met and where, with his own hands, he had shed his father's blood, which was his own blood? And then what a crime he had committed in Thebes! He had married his own mother and begotten children by her, thus mingling the blood of fathers, mothers, wives, sons and brothers. This was the most horrible of all crimes. In view of all this Oedipus would like to be banished immediately, or be killed or be thrown into the sea where he may sink from view. He appeals to the Chorus-Leader not to shrink from touching him. There is no man alive says Oedipus, who can endure this load of evil but Oedipus himself. The Chorus-Leader now informs Oedipus that he should address his prayer to Creon who is coming towards them and who will now be the King of Thebes.

Oedipus's Request to Creon

Creon now appears on the scene. Oedipus finds it hard even to speak to him, because he badly misjudged Creon and falsely accused him of treason. However, Creon proves very considerate. He tells Oedipus that he is not gloating over Oedipus's misfortunes. At the same time he would not like anyone to set his eyes upon such a sinful and polluted person as Oedipus. He would like Oedipus to be taken inside the palace so that only his kinsmen should see and hear the evils resulting from Oedipus's sins. Oedipus says that he has only one request to make: he would like to be banished from Thebes so that he can be alone and nobody is able to speak to him. Creon replies that he would like to obtain divine approval for such an action. Oedipus says that the oracle had given full instructions in advance for the destruction of the man who had killed Laius. Creon says that those were the original instructions but that he would like to ascertain the opinion of the gods in the present situation. Oedipus then calls upon Creon to perform the appropriate burial ceremonies for the dead Jocasta. As for himself, he would not like to live in Thebes any more. He would like to go to Mt. Cithaeron and die at the place where he had been sent as an infant to die. Oedipus goes on to say that Creon need not bother about Oedipus's sons who, being men, will be able to look after themselves. But he would certainly want Creon to look after Oedipus's unhappy daughters.

Oedipus and His Daughters

Oedipus then asks if he can be permitted to hold his two daughters in his arms for a while. Just then he hears the sobbing of his daughters whom Creon had already sent for. Oedipus expresses his gratitude to Creon for having allowed him to meet his children. He then turns to his daughters, feeling for them the love of a brother as well as the love of a father. He cannot see them (because he is now blind), but he can weep for them because of the bitter life that they will have to lead. He knows that, with the dark shadow of their father's sins upon them, they will never be able to lead a normal life, to take part in the celebration of festivals, to join the gatherings of citizens, and so on. No man will take to marry them. Oedipus says that he has brought shame and disgrace to his family first by killing his own father, next by marrying the woman who had given him birth, and then by having begotten children from that very woman who was the source of life for him. He laments the fact that his daughters will remain unwedded and unfruitful. He then entrusts his daughters to the care of Creon, appealing to him to have pity on them in their state of wretchedness and desolation.

Oedipus Not Allowed to Have His Way in all Things

Creon advises Oedipus to shed no more tears but to go inside. Oedipus says that he wishes to be banished from Thebes. Creon replies that this cannot be done without divine approval. Oedipus asks if Creon will promise to carry out the will of the gods at the earliest. Creon replies that he cannot say

anything till he has actually obtained the will of the gods. Oedipus then says that he would like to keep the children with him, but Creon rebukes him for trying to have his way in all things. Creon would like Oedipus to learn from his past experiences and not to forget that his rule is over.

The Moral

The play ends with the Chorus pointing out the moral of the story. Oedipus, the greatest of men, was envied by all of his fellow-men for his great prosperity. But afterwards he was overtaken by a full tide of misfortunes. Let all human beings remember that none can be called happy until that day when he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace. (The Chorus means that human happiness is transient and that it can never last till the last day of a man's life).

Character or Destiny ?

Different Interpretations of the Play Possible

Oedipus Rex is a play that may be interpreted in various ways. Perhaps Sophocles here wishes to tell us that man is only the plaything of Fate. Or, perhaps, Sophocles means to say that the gods have contrived an awful fate for Oedipus in order to display their power to man and to teach him a wholesome lesson. At the beginning of the play Oedipus is the great King who at one time saved Thebes at a crucial hour and who is the only hope of the people now. At the end of the play, Oedipus is the polluted outcast, himself the cause of the city's distress, through crimes predicted by Apollo before he was born. It is possible also that Sophocles has simply written an exciting drama without going into its philosophical implications.

Characters and Adverse Circumstances Responsible for the Catastrophe

The action of *Oedipus Rex* shows a certain duality. In the foreground are autonomous human actors, drawn fully and vividly. Oedipus himself, Teiresias, Creon, Jocasta, and the two shepherds are all perfectly lifelike characters, and so are the remoter characters who do not appear on the stage—the hot-tempered Laius at the cross-roads and the unknown Corinthian who insulted Oedipus by saying that the latter was not the son of Polybus. The circumstances, too, are natural, even inevitable, once we accept the characters. Oedipus, as we see him on various occasions, appears to be intelligent, determined, self-reliant but hot-tempered and too sure of himself. As apparently hostile chain of circumstances combines, now with the strong side of his character and now with its weak side, to bring about the catastrophe. A man of a poor spirit would have tolerated the insult and remained safe in Corinth. But Oedipus was resolute. Not content with Polybus's assurance he went to Delphi and consulted the oracle; and when the oracle, instead of answering his question repeated the warning given originally to Laius. Oedipus, being a man of determination, never went back to Corinth. By a coincidence he met Laius at the cross-roads and, as father and son were of a similar temper, a fight took place. Being a man of a high intelligence, Oedipus was able, afterwards, to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. But though intelligent he was blind enough to marry a woman old enough to be his mother, all the time feeling sure that his mother was in Corinth. Whatever happens is the natural result of the weaknesses and the virtues of his character, in combination with other people's. Sophocles does not try to make us feel that a relentless destiny or a hostile god is guiding the events.

Whatever happens is a tragic chapter from Oedipus's life except for the original oracle and its repetition.

A Hidden Power in the Background

At the same time we are made to feel that the action of the play is moving on a parallel and higher plane. The presence of some power or some design in the background is already suggested by the continuous dramatic irony. In the matter of the plague this hidden power is definitely stated. The presence of this power is most imaginatively revealed in the scene containing Jocasta's offer of a sacrifice. She, who refused to believe in the oracles, surprises us by coming out of the palace with sacrificial offerings. She lays them on Apollo's altar, burns the incense, and prays for deliverance from fear. There is a moment of reverent silence, which is broken by the arrival of the cheerful messenger from Corinth. The messenger brings the news that Polybus is dead. All fear comes to an end. Jocasta's prayer has been heard. But soon afterwards Jocasta hangs herself. This is how Jocasta's prayer has been answered ! But how does the god answer the pitiable prayer of Jocasta ? Not by any direct intervention. It was not Apollo who instigated the Corinthian to come. It was the Corinthian's own eagerness to be the first with the "good" news. He wanted to win the new king's favour because, besides the news of Oedipus's succession to the throne of Corinth, the Corinthian is completely autonomous, and yet in his coming the hand of the god is visible. Thus the action moves on two planes at once. In spite of that the whole texture of the play is so vividly naturalistic that we must hesitate to interpret it as showing a bleak determinism. These people are not puppets in the hands of higher powers; they act in their own right.

No Display of Power by the Gods

Nor does this texture support the view that the gods want to display their power to man and teach him a lesson. If Sophocles meant the gods to display their powers by pre-determining the life of Oedipus in order to teach men a lesson, it was quite easy for Sophocles to say so; he could have made the Chorus sing a song on the power and mysterious ways of the gods, but he does not do so. On the contrary, the ode that immediately follows the catastrophe expresses the view that the fate of Oedipus is typical of human life and fortunes and not that it is a special display of divine power. Secondly, although Oedipus is by far the greatest sufferer in the play, he is not the only one. There are others who suffer, though not in the same degree, and we must take them into consideration also. Sophocles wants us to treat Oedipus not as a special case except in the degree to which he suffers. Oedipus is typical, as the Chorus says. What happens to Oedipus is part of the whole web of human life. One reason why Sophocles introduces the children towards the end of the play is that Oedipus may say to them what he does actually say: "What a life must yours be ! Who will admit you to the gatherings of the citizens and to the festivals ? Who will marry you ?" In short, Sophocles, wants to tell us that the innocent suffer with the guilty; such is life, such are the gods.

The Disappointment and the Distress in Store for the Two Shepherds

The two shepherds deserve consideration also. Sophocles has presented them sharply, with their motives, hopes and fears. The Corinthian frankly expects a reward because the news he has brought is great news; but he has something much more surprising in reserve, and the moment for revealing it soon comes. Oedipus learns that he is not the son of Polybus but the circumstances in which Oedipus as an infant fell into the hands of the Corinthian have to be explained by the Theban shepherd who handed over the child to the Corinthian. Jocasta's last despairing cry does not disturb Oedipus because Oedipus interprets it as Jocasta's disappointment at finding her husband to be a man of low birth. The Chorus is happy and excited, and, when the Theban shepherd is brought in, the Corinthian becomes even more obliging and helpful as he works up to his climax, "Here is the man, my friend, who was that baby!" And this is his last speech. No reward for him, no glory in Corinth, only bewilderment and utter dismay, for in a moment he hears the true facts from the Theban shepherd's lips. Such is the outcome, for these two shepherds, of their benevolent interest in an abandoned baby. Can we regard all this as the work of Apollo? Here, as in the much bigger case of Oedipus, is that combination of well-meant action with a situation which makes it lead to disaster. An act of mercy, tinged with a perfectly honest shrewdness, leads the Corinthian to the verge of great prosperity, but as he gets ready to receive it, eagerly and with confidence it turns into horror. The other shepherd to is one who refused to kill a baby. Part of his reward came years later when he saw the man who killed Laius occupying the throne of Thebes and married to the Queen—an event which sent him, for his own safety, into half-exile. The rest of his reward comes now, when a sudden command brings him back to last to the city, to learn what he learns there.

The "Catharsis" in the Perfection of Form

These minor tragedies, of the children and the shepherds, are in harmony with the major one. Such is Apollo and such is human life. An awful sin is committed in all innocence, children are born to a life of shame, and virtuous intentions go wrong. Where does the "catharsis" lie? It lies in the ultimate illumination which turns a painful story into a profound and moving experience. It has been suggested that the catharsis of a play like this lies in the perfection of its form. The perfection of form represents, by implication, the forces of righteousness and beneficence of which Aeschylus speaks directly in his choric odes.

The Universe Not Chaotic and Irrational

It is necessary to add a word about Jocasta's sacrifice, and Apollo's swift and terrible answer. Jocasta has been denying the truth of oracles. Sophocles certainly does not consider Jocasta's unbelief to be a kind of wickedness deserving severe punishment. Sophocles means much more than this. Jocasta has said that there is no need to fear oracles and that one should live at

random. This is a doctrine which would deny the very basis of all serious Greek thought. The Greeks believed that the universe was not chaotic and irrational, but was based on an obedience to law. The tragic poets too thought in this way. In Aeschylus we find moral laws which have the same kind of validity as physical and mathematical laws. The doer must suffer. To the mind of Sophocles the law shows itself as a balance, rhythm, or pattern in human affairs. Call no man happy until he is dead, Sophocles tells us. But this does not mean that life is chaotic. If it so appears to us it is because we are unable to see the whole pattern. But sometimes when life for a moment becomes dramatic, we can see enough pattern to give us faith that there is a meaning in the whole. In *Antigone* when Creon is overwhelmed, it is by the natural recoil of his own acts, working themselves out through the minds and passions of Antigone and Haemon and we can see in this a natural justice. In *Electra* the vengeance that at last falls on the murderers is linked to their crime by the natural chains of cause and effect. In *Oedipus Rex* we get a much more complex picture. Here we have a man who is destroyed like a man inadvertently interfering with the natural flow of electricity. Many casual and unrelated actions contribute to the ruin—actions of the shepherds, the charioteer who tried to push Oedipus off the road, the man at the banquet in Corinth. Things happen contrary to all expectation. Life seems cruel and chaotic. Cruel, yes; but chaotic, no—for if it were chaotic no god could predict, and Jocasta's view of life would be right. Piety and purity are not the whole of the mysterious pattern of life, as the fate of Oedipus shows, but they are an important part of it, and the doctrine of chaos would deny even this. The pattern may hit the life of the individual cruelly, but at least we know that it exists; we feel assured that piety and purity are a large part of it.

Every detail in this play is devised in order to support Sophocles's faith in this underlying law and the need of obeying it. That is why we can say that the perfection of form implies a world-order. Whether or not it is beneficent, Sophocles does not say.

Oedipus's Self-Blinding

I

Why the Blinding ?

Why does Oedipus blind himself? So that the eyes should no longer look upon the people, the things, that they should not. Sophocles says so. He repeats it: how could Oedipus share sensibilities with his fellow citizens, with whom he can now share nothing? If he could have shut off the sources of hearing, he would have, thus making himself the outcast who was to be banned from the community, because the murderer was to be that outcast, and Oedipus is the murderer. Sophocles adds that it would be sweet for Oedipus to cut himself loose from all evils, from all his life he knows now as evil; and then Sophocles seems to contradict himself when Oedipus cries for his daughters and calls them into his arms. But, by then, the mood of frenzy has ebbed along with the strength of fury, and Oedipus is himself again, reasoning, and justifying.

The Three Stages of the Life of Oedipus: Oedipus as Everyman

Oedipus's self-blinding can be seen from various angles. It seems to be a punishment of what is evil, for Oedipus does not deign to call himself unlucky, ill-starred, but just evil or vile. But the blinding serves one more purpose. The riddle of the Sphinx spoke of man feeble as a baby, man strong as a grown-up man (walking on two feet), and man feeble in old age. And we have had Oedipus as a baby. Oedipus as a grown-up man, a strong traveller walking on his two feet. We need Oedipus old and unfeebled, and he is still a man in his prime and very strong. Only such a disastrous self-punishment can break him so that, within moments, he has turned into an old man who needs strength now, and needs someone to lead him. So Oedipus has lived the three stages. The riddle of the Sphinx was the mystery of man. But it was the specially private mystery of Oedipus. In this sense, and perhaps in this sense only, Oedipus is Everyman.

Oedipus, a Unique Individual

Oedipus is bent by the shape of the story but he generates a momentum which makes his necessary act his own. He is the tragedy tyrant driven by his plot, but he is more, a unique individual, and somehow a great man, who drives himself.

Blinding, a Kind of Castration

Freud said that this blinding stands for the only logical self-punishment, castration. The eyes are as precious to man as are the genitals. One may expand this interpretation by stating that Oedipus retaliates upon the eyes, not only the epistemological mistake in genitalia (both being organs of knowledge), but he avenges also on the outside eye the blindness of the inner eye. What was the sense of those carnal eyes when they saw and did not perceive? This is what Oedipus says in blinding himself: "You were too long blind for those I was looking for." The same implication is present in the words of Christ stating that adultery can be committed not only by the genitals but also by the eyes; consequently to pluck out the eyes is tantamount to castration.

II

Self-blinding, a Culminating Act of Freedom

Oedipus's own motives in blinding himself are far from clear. He says that he did it to spare himself the sight of the ugliness he had caused, that he could not bring himself to face the people on whom he had brought such suffering. In *Oedipus at Colonus* he tells his son that he did it in a moment of frenzy and not from a sense of guilt. When the Chorus, in the present play, asks him directly why he did it, he says that Apollo had a hand in it. Again, he says that he did it so that he might not meet eye-to-eye his father or his mother "beyond the grave". No one reason suffices, nor all of them put together. The act seems compounded of opposite elements: egotism and altruism, self-loathing and self-glorification. As an act of destruction, it shows man at his worst. To the extent that it was predetermined, it shows the gods at their worst. But as an act of freedom it turns out to be curiously creative in unexpected ways, and shows man at his best. What Oedipus insists upon in his reply and shows man at his best. What Oedipus insists upon in his reply to the Chorus is that the act was his own: "Apollo, friends, Apollo has laid this agony upon me; not by his hand; I did it." Whatever he may have thought he was doing, the act stands in the play as his culminating act of freedom, the assertion of his ability to act independently of any god, oracle, or prophecy.

III

The Reason for Self-Mutilation

Why does Oedipus blind himself if he is morally innocent? He tells us the reason: he has done it in order to cut himself off from all contact with humanity. If he could choke the channels of his other senses he would do so. Suicide would not serve his purpose because in the next world he would have to meet his dead parents. Oedipus mutilates himself because he can face neither the living nor the dead. If Oedipus had been tried in an Athenian court, he would have been acquitted of murdering his father. But no human court could acquit him of pollution, because pollution was inherent in the act itself,

irrespective of its unintentional character. Least of all could Oedipus acquit himself of this burden.

Self-mutilation Not Surprising in this Case

Oedipus is no ordinary murderer. He has committed the two crimes which, more than any others, fill us with horror. And in the strongly patriarchal society of ancient Greece the horror would be more intense than it is in our own. We have only to read Plato's prescription of the merciless treatment to be given to a parricide. And if that is how Greek Justice treated parricides, it is not surprising that Oedipus treats himself as he does. The great King, the first of men, the man whose intuitive genius saved Thebes, would surely act like this when he is suddenly revealed to himself as a thing so unclean that "neither the earth can receive it, nor the holy rain nor the sunshine endure its presence."

The Character of Oedipus in the Final Scene of the Play

Oedipus's Recovery in the Final Scene

The play does not end with the proof of divine omniscience and human ignorance. It ends, as it begins, with Oedipus. We cannot be content with the assessment of the Chorus when they say that all the generations of mortal man add up to nothing. (The Chorus makes this remark just after Oedipus learns the truth about his own identity). If the play were to end with this assessment, it would mean that the heroic action of Oedipus in pursuing the truth is a hollow mockery. It would mean that a man should not seek the truth for fear of what he might find. As it is, the final scene of the play offers a different estimate, though not in words but in dramatic action. In the final scene Oedipus, on whom the hopeless estimate of the Chorus is based, overcomes the disaster that has overtaken him and reasserts himself. He is so far from being equal to zero that towards the close of the play Creon has to tell him not to try to assert his will in everything. The last scene of the play is, indeed, vital, though it is often wrongly criticised as unbearable or as an anti-climax. The last scene shows us the recovery of Oedipus, his reintegration, and the reconstitution of the dominating, dynamic and intelligent figure of the opening scenes.

Oedipus, a Zero at the Beginning of the Last Scene

When Oedipus comes out of the palace after having blinded himself, the sight of him is so terrible that the Chorus can hardly bear to look at him. The Chorus approves his wish that he should have died on the mountain-side before reaching manhood. Further, the Chorus tells him that it would be better for him to be dead now than to live as a blind man. This despair is expressed in Oedipus's own words also; they are the words of a broken man. What he says, and the manner in which he says it, shows that Oedipus is no longer an active force but purely passive. This impression is supported by his address to the darkness in which he will now for ever live and by his reference to the pain which pierces his eyes and mind alike. Oedipus gratefully recognises the loyalty of the Chorus in looking after him, a blind man. This is an expression of his complete dependence on others. He seems indeed a zero, equal to nothing.

His Own Responsibility for the Blinding

The Chorus at this point reminds him that his blindness is the result of his own independent action after he came to know the truth about himself. His

blindness was not required by the prophecy of Apollo. Nor was it demanded in the oracle's instructions. His blindness was an autonomous action on his part. The Chorus asks him if he was prompted by some god in the act of blinding himself. Oedipus replies that while Apollo brought his sufferings to fulfilment, the hand that blinded him was his own. His action was self-chosen. It was a swift decisive action for which he assumes full responsibility and which he now defends. At this stage, the original Oedipus re-asserts himself. He rejects the suggestion of the Chorus that the responsibility was not his. He rejects the reproaches of the Chorus. We now see the same man as we met in the earlier scenes of the play. All the traits of his strong character reappear. His attitude to the new and terrible situation in which he now finds himself is full of the same courage which he displayed before. When the Chorus scolds him for having made a bad decision in blinding himself, he replies with the old impatience and a touch of the old anger. He tells them not to preach a lesson to him or to give him any advice to the effect that he has not done the best thing. He goes on to describe in detail the reasoning by which he arrived at the decision to blind himself. His decision was, no doubt, a result of some reflection. Oedipus shows himself fully convinced of the rightness of his action and the thinking which led him to it.

Insistence on Punishment

Oedipus insists, in the face of Creon's opposition, that he be put to death or exiled from Thebes. He rejects the compromise offered by the Chorus with the same courage with which he had earlier dismissed the attempts of Teiresias, Jocasta, and the Shepherd to stop the investigation. As before he cannot tolerate any half-measures or delay. Creon and his own curse call for his exile or death and he sees no point in prolonging the matter. Creon finally does what Oedipus wanted to be done sooner: Creon exiles Oedipus from Thebes. Oedipus, in demanding the punishment, insists on full clarity and on all the facts. He spares himself no detail of the consequences of his pollution for himself and for his daughters. While Creon's reaction is to cover and conceal, Oedipus brings everything out into the open. Oedipus analyses in painful detail his own situation and that of his children.

Destined to Live

The old confidence in his own intelligence and action is very much there. However, the exaggerated and leaping hopefulness is gone. And yet there is still a kind of hope in him. After his initial wish for death, he becomes sure that he is destined to live. He feels that he is in some sense too strong to be destroyed. He feels himself as eminent in disaster as he once was in prosperity. His sufferings, he says, are such as no one except himself can bear.

Concerned about the Welfare of the City

Nor does his devotion to the interests of the city become extinct in him. He is anxious that the terms of his own curse and the demand of the oracle be immediately and exactly fulfilled. This anxiety arises partly from his sense of

the city's need of release from the plague. The release can come only through the punishment of the murderer of Laius. It is in terms of the interest of the city that he states his desire for exile. He speaks this time not as the tyrant but with a consciousness of his newly revealed position as the hereditary monarch. He does not want the city of his fore-fathers to be doomed.

His Adaptability to Circumstances

Oedipus shows also a great capacity to adapt himself to the change in his circumstances. The process of his rapid adjustment to his blindness is well depicted. In the opening lines of this scene, he shows a helpless desperation. Soon he comes to realise that he has still some power of perception and recognition; he can hear. He tells the Chorus-Leader that he can clearly distinguish his voice, blind though he may be. After recognising the possibilities as well as the limitations of his new state, he begins to adapt himself to the larger aspects of the situation. Oedipus is now an outcast and, as Teiresias told him he would be, a beggar. When he was the autocratic ruler his wish was an order; but as a beggar he lives by insistent appeal, by emphatic and often importunate pleading. When Creon appears, Oedipus shows how he has adapted himself to the change. The words of entreaty come as easily from his lips as the words of authority used to come before, though his words now are charged with the same fierce energy. Oedipus begs to be expelled from the city. Subsequently he seeks the privilege of saying fare-well to his children. When his request is granted, Oedipus invokes blessings on Creon as a beggar might. Later he makes another appeal to Creon's pity, requesting him not to let his daughters wander about husband-less, thus indicating his own status as a beggar. Indeed, Oedipus makes a strikingly successful adjustment to his new role. As a beggar he cannot be resisted, because his insistent entreaty is marked by an emphasis and a force which remind us of the days of his prosperity. When he first hears the voice of Creon whom he had wrongly condemned to death, he is full of shame and at a loss for words. Yet in a few moments he is arguing stubbornly with him.

An Active Force in the Last Scene

Thus in the last scene of the play Oedipus, after a brief interval during which he is reduced to a zero, shows himself to be an active force. His intelligence assures him that he must go immediately into exile, and to this point of view he clings obstinately. He presses his point so persistently and forcefully that Creon has to yield to it. At the last moment, when Creon orders him into the palace, Oedipus imposes a condition. The condition is the same demand which he has obstinately repeated throughout the scene, namely that Creon should immediately exile him from Thebes. Creon's attempt to shift the responsibility by seeking the advice of the oracle is rejected by Oedipus, and Oedipus is right. According to the original advice of the oracle, and also according to the curse uttered by Oedipus, the murderer of Laius must be exiled. While allowing himself to be led into the palace, Oedipus makes an

attempt to take his children with him, but at this point Creon finally asserts himself and separates the children from their father, rebuking Oedipus for trying to have his own way. Oedipus cannot have his way in everything, but in most things he has got his way, including the most important issue of all, namely his expulsion; in this matter the blind beggar has imposed his will on Creon.

A Remarkable and Rapid Recovery

In the last scene of the play, then, Oedipus makes a remarkable and swift recovery from the position of a non-entity to which he had been reduced by his discovery of the truth about himself. This recovery proceeds from no change in his wretched situation; it is not the result of any promise or assurance by any human or divine being. This recovery, like every one of his actions and attitudes, is autonomous. It is the expression of a great personality which defies human expectation as it once defied divine prophecy. The last scene shows a remarkable re-assertion of Oedipus's forceful personality.

His Greatness in His Ruin as in His Prosperity

Thus the play ends with a fresh insistence on the heroic nature of Oedipus. The play ends as it began, with the greatness of the hero; but it is a different kind of greatness. This greatness is based on knowledge and not on ignorance as previously. Oedipus now directs the full force of his intelligence and action to the fulfilment of the oracle's command that the murderer of Laius be killed or exiled. Creon taunts Oedipus with his former lack of belief in the oracles but Oedipus does not care to answer the taunt. Oedipus repeatedly makes the demand that the command of the oracle be immediately and literally fulfilled. The heroic qualities of Oedipus were previously exercised against prophecy and the destiny of which it was the expression. Now those heroic qualities are being exercised to support prophecy. The heroic qualities of Oedipus are being given full play even now but now *with* the powers that shape destiny and govern the world, not *against* those powers. The confidence which was once based solely on himself now acquires a firmer basis; it now proceeds from a knowledge of the nature of reality and the forces which govern it. In the last scene he supports the command of the oracle against the will of Creon. It is Creon now who shows a politic attitude towards the oracle, and Oedipus who insists on its literal fulfilment. Oedipus is now blind like Teiresias, and like Teiresias he has a more penetrating vision than the ruler he opposes. In this scene Oedipus has in fact become the spokesman of Apollo. His action ceases to be self-defeating, because it is based on true knowledge. The greatness of Oedipus in his ruin is no less, and in some senses more, than the greatness of Oedipus when he was a powerful King.

The Character and Role of Teiresias

A Man of an Established Reputation as a Prophet

Teiresias, the blind prophet, appears early in the play. Acting upon the advice of Creon, Oedipus had sent for the prophet in order to seek his guidance in the context of the misfortunes which are taking a heavy toll of the lives of the people of Thebes. Teiresias, we learn, has come somewhat unwillingly in response to the summons of the King. As Oedipus's very first speech to Teiresias shows, Teiresias is a man of an established reputation and is greatly honoured in Thebes. Oedipus begins by saying that nothing is beyond Teiresias's powers of divination. Both sacred and profane, both heavenly and earthly knowledge, are in Teiresias's grasp. Teiresias can help and protect the city of Thebes, says Oedipus, appealing to him to save the city and its people.

Teiresias Provoked to Anger by Oedipus's Rudeness

Teiresias is reluctant to supply any information or guidance to Oedipus for the relief of the sufferings of the people. He does have the necessary knowledge, but it would not be wise on his part to disclose what he knows. In fact the knowledge which he has in connection with the disaster that has overtaken the city is a heavy weight on his mind. Having strong reasons of his own to keep silent, Teiresias refuses to tell Oedipus anything. When Oedipus loses his temper, Teiresias is not in the least scared. On the contrary, he speaks to Oedipus in a defiant tone, asking him to rage as much as he pleases. Irritated by Oedipus's false accusation, Teiresias bluntly says that Oedipus himself is the cursed polluter of Thebes. Teiresias does not show any fear of Oedipus, saying that truth is his defence. Pressed still further by Oedipus, Teiresias says that Oedipus himself is the murderer for whom he is searching, adding that Oedipus is living in sinful union with one whom he loves. When asked by Oedipus how he can make such slanderous statements, Teiresias once again says that he is protected by truth. When Oedipus taunts him with his blindness, Teiresias feels further excited. Oedipus's claim that he has an intelligence superior to that of Teiresias, and his boast that it was he who saved the city from the Sphinx, offend the prophet even more. In fact, Teiresias now feels so provoked that he becomes as reckless in making predictions about Oedipus as he was reserved at the beginning. Oedipus may be having eyes which can see but he is blind to his own damnation, says Teiresias. Oedipus has sinned but he does not know it; he has sinned against one who is already in the grave and he has sinned against one who is yet alive on earth. The curse of his father and the curse of his mother will drive

Oedipus out of this city. These clear-seeing eyes of Oedipus will then be darkened. When Oedipus learns his real identity, he will feel more miserable than can be imagined. All this Teiresias pitilessly flings into Oedipus's face.

Teiresias's Dreadful Threats

When Oedipus, almost mad with rage, commands the prophet to get out of his sight, Teiresias leaves, but not before he has delivered another onslaught upon the King. Teiresias now says that the murderer of Laius is here in Thebes; that the murderer, regarded as a foreigner, is actually a Theban by birth, that the murderer came to the city with eyes that could see but will leave afterwards, and that the murderer is rich now but will be a beggar to the children whom he loves, and both the son and the husband of the woman who gave him birth. Only when Oedipus can prove these predictions to be wrong, will he be justified in calling Teiresias blind.

Teiresias's Complete Lack of Humility

While we certainly admire Teiresias for his foresight and his prophetic gift, we cannot reconcile ourselves to his arrogance, haughtiness, and feeling of self-importance. There is no doubt that Oedipus offends him with his tone of authority and command, but we should have expected a certain amount of moderation in a man who is spiritually so great as to know the minds of the gods and to be able to read the future. Unfortunately, we find that humility is not one of the virtues of Teiresias. He is as hot-tempered as Oedipus, and equally reckless. No doubt, his refusal to unburden his knowledge is prompted by the best of motives: he would not like to foretell unpleasant facts to Oedipus till the time is ripe for him to discover those facts in the natural course of events. But even so he has no right to lose his self-control to such an extent as to hit back Oedipus for Oedipus's offensive remarks, especially when in trying to retaliate he discloses, though in a veiled manner, the very facts which he had sought to suppress. Teiresias is sensitive to insult, but he is almost merciless in lashing the King with his cutting remarks, and heartless to the point of vindictiveness.

Contributes to Dramatic Irony

Furthermore, Teiresias contributes to the tragic irony which is present throughout this play. In this particular scene, tragic irony is provided by the predictions which Teiresias makes. Teiresias knows the full import of his predictions, while Oedipus is completely ignorant of their significance. As for the audience, some members will be aware of the true meaning of these predictions while others will be ignorant of it depending upon whether they are reading the play for the first or the second time.

18

The Character and Role of Creon**A True Servant of the State. A Simple and Straightforward Man; the Bringer of a Message from the Oracle**

If Teiresias, with his prophetic powers, may be described as the true servant of the gods then Creon, the brother of Queen Jocasta, may be regarded as the true servant of the State. We meet Creon quite early in the play, in fact in the prologue itself. He returns from Delphi whither he had been sent by Oedipus to seek the oracle's guidance. He has brought what he considers to be good news, the news that may lead to good results if all goes well. This news is most crucial for the people of Thebes and also from the point of view of this play. The news is, indeed, the starting point of the investigation which occupies the major part of the play. The news is that the murderer of King Laius lives on the soil of Thebes and must be killed or banished if the people are to expect any relief in the vast suffering which they are undergoing. As Oedipus knows nothing about the history of King Laius, he questions Creon with regard to Laius's death, and Creon gives a simple, straightforward account of the circumstances of Laius's death as known to him, though his knowledge is not first-hand, having been obtained from the survivor of the small group of persons attending upon Laius. At this stage we do not have enough data to form a proper estimate of the character of Creon. Judging by appearances only, he is a well-meaning sort of person, free from any trickery or deceit.

Creon's Able Reasoning: His Defence of Himself

We next meet Creon after Oedipus has had a quarrel with Teiresias in the course of which Oedipus has expressed his suspicion that Creon has, in collaboration with Teiresias, hatched a conspiracy against him. Having come to know what Oedipus has said about him, Creon arrives and has a brief talk with the member of the Chorus. He says that Oedipus has brought a slanderous charge against him which he finds hard to endure. Creon seems to have been stunned by the charge. He says that he would rather die than be guilty of doing any harm to Oedipus either by word or by act. The Chorus tries to soothe him by saying that Oedipus spoke the offensive words in a fit of anger. On being asked by Creon whether Oedipus had alleged that Teiresias had been instigated by Creon, the Chorus confirms what Creon has heard. At this point Oedipus appears and directly accuses Creon of treason. Creon would like to explain his position, but Oedipus hardly lets him speak. However, Creon does get an opportunity to speak in his self-defence, and the speech he makes shows his powers of reasoning and persuasive talk, though

his eloquence falls flat on Oedipus. Creon argues that he would be the last man to desire Oedipus's throne and that the question of his plotting against Oedipus's life does not, therefore, arise. He is leading a quiet and carefree life, he says, and he is at the same time wielding a lot of influence in the city by virtue of his close relationship with Oedipus. As a moderate man, he desires nothing more. Kingship would not please him more than his present status does. He is not so foolish as to seek more honours than are good for him. As for his sincerity and truthfulness, Oedipus can himself go to Delphi and verify if the message brought by Creon was genuine or not. If he is found guilty of any secret agreement with Teiresias, he would be ready to forfeit his life. But he would not tolerate a charge of treason against him on mere suspicion. Oedipus has committed a blunder by bringing a baseless charge against a loyal man, Creon says. By discarding an honest friend like Creon, Oedipus would be losing a precious treasure. Time alone will teach Oedipus the truth of this observation. While the Chorus supports Creon in what he has said, Oedipus rejects Creon's plea and says that he will punish Creon's treason with death. The speech that Creon makes in his self-defence shows his transparent honesty and loyalty even though Oedipus is at this time blinded by his prejudice.

A Man who Speaks on the Basis of Sure Knowledge

Two other remarks which Creon makes in the course of this interview with Oedipus are important: he does not presume to say more than he actually knows; and what he knows he will freely confess. The first observation shows that Creon does not indulge in idle conjectures or speculation, while the second remark shows that he will not hide what he knows. Both these traits of his character raise him in our estimation.

Jocasta's Faith in Him, and the Faith of the Chorus

Creon enjoys the full confidence of his sister, Jocasta. As soon as she learns about the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon she scolds both men. When Creon complains that Oedipus has unjustly sentenced him to death on a charge of treason, and swears that he has always been loyal to Oedipus, Jocasta pleads to her husband on Creon's behalf asking the King to believe Creon's oath. The Chorus supports Jocasta's petition, pointing out that Creon has never in the past played false to Oedipus. At the entreaties of Jocasta and the Chorus, Oedipus certainly withdraws the sentence of death against Creon, but does not cease to suspect him of treason. All our sympathy in this scene is with Creon, and we deplore Oedipus's hasty judgment in condemning an innocent and tried man on the basis of a mere suspicion.

His Consideration for and Kindness to the Blind Oedipus; His Piety and Faith in the Oracles

In the final scene, again, Creon gives a good account of himself and reinforces the favourable impression which we have already formed of him. He tells Oedipus, who is now blind, that he has not come to exult at Oedipus's

downfall or to reproach Oedipus for his past misdeeds, though at the same time he would not like the unclean Oedipus to remain outside the palace in the full light of the day. A sinner like Oedipus must not expose himself to public view, says Creon. Out of consideration for the paternal feelings of Oedipus, Creon has already sent for Oedipus's daughters so that he may be able to draw some comfort from their company. Creon's kindness and consideration towards the man, who had unjustly accused him of treason and had almost taken his life, further raise him in our regard. Creon is now the King and wields all the authority of a King. But Kingship does not turn his head. His religious piety has not diminished one whit. He believed in prophecies before and he believes in them now; his reverence for the oracle suffers no decline. And he repeats what he had previously said, "I do not speak beyond my knowledge." Creon's character may be summed up in these words: self-restraint, self-control, moderation, avoidance of excess of all kinds, and speaking from sure knowledge only.

The Character of Jocasta

I

A Moderate and Reasonable Woman

Jocasta has a brief but essential and crucial role to play in the drama. She appears on the stage just after Oedipus has had a quarrel with Creon and has declared his resolve to punish Creon with death. The very first speech of Jocasta shows her to be a moderate kind of person with a balanced mind. She scolds both her husband and her brother for quarrelling over private matters when the city is passing through a critical phase of its existence. She calls upon her husband to go into the palace and advises Creon to go home. On learning the cause of the quarrel, she appeals to Oedipus to believe Creon's assertions of innocence and not to distrust Creon's oath. She pleads on Creon's behalf not just because he is her brother but because she knows him to be a dependable man and a man of integrity. She insists on knowing from Oedipus why he has conceived such a terrible hatred against Creon.

Her Scepticism

Jocasta is frankly sceptical of prophecies and, therefore, is, according to the religious ideas of the time, guilty of irreverence towards the gods. She believes neither in the oracles nor in the interpreters of oracles. When Oedipus tells her that her brother has been using the prophet Teiresias as his tool, she unhesitatingly advises her husband not to attach any importance to prophets or soothsayers. She expresses the view that no human being possesses the power of divination (*i.e.*, the power of knowing the unknown and probing into the mysteries of life). In a speech, which is a striking example of dramatic irony in the play, she tries to prove her point with reference to the very prophecy the exact and complete fulfilment of which forms the theme of this whole play. She tells Oedipus of the prophecy which said that Laius was to die at the hands of his own son; she tells him of how Laius had taken measures to see that his child by her would perish on the mountain-side; she tells him that Laius had not died at the hands of his son. Jocasta's story is intended to prove that oracles are not necessarily reliable. Her ultimate discovery of the true facts becomes all the more tragic in the light of this speech in which she denies the oracles.

Contribution to the Investigation of the Truth

Jocasta is the means by which Oedipus is enabled to make some progress in his investigation into the murder of Laius. The surviving member of Laius's

party alone can confirm or remove the suspicion which is now troubling Oedipus's mind, the suspicion, namely, that he might himself be the murderer of Laius. Jocasta undertakes to summon that man, though she repeats that there is no such thing as divination. When the Corinthian messenger comes with his great news, Jocasta feels further confirmed in her view that divine prognostications are meaningless. She mocks the oracles when Oedipus comes to meet the Corinthian.

Her View of the Role of Chance and Her Belief in Living at Random

Jocasta gives further expression to her philosophy of life when she urges Oedipus not to entertain fears of any kind. What has a man to do with fear? she asks. She is of the view that chance rules human lives and that the future is all unknown. Let human beings live as best as they can, from day to day. She favours living at random. As for Oedipus's fear that he might marry his mother, men do such things only in their dreams. Such things must be forgotten, if life is to be endured. There is much in this philosophy that appeals to us. The only snag about his philosophy is that only a few moments later it is proved to be utterly false and Jocasta discovers to her horror that the oracles are after all true.

Her Sad End

After the discovery of the truth, Jocasta tries to prevent Oedipus from learning the truth, though he pays no attention to her. A little later we learn that she has hanged herself in her fit of sorrow and grief. She was seen calling upon her dead husband, Laius, remembering the son to whom she had given birth long before, the son who had killed his father, the son who became her husband and begot children by her. The end which Jocasta meets was the only right end for a woman in her position. It is an appropriate end for her, and this end contributes to the effect of catharsis which this play produces in full measure.

II

Her Scepticism and Impiety

Oedipus does not stand alone. Jocasta's love and anxiety are always at his side. It is her tragedy that she actively leads Oedipus towards their common disaster, and that she realizes the truth gradually though always in advance of him. Jocasta is sceptical of oracles and is, therefore, impious from the traditional point of view. She certainly distinguishes between the god and the god's priest when she tells the story of the oracle given to Laius; she speaks of the oracle as having come "not from Phoebus himself, but from his ministers." But even so she is aware of the impiety implied in her words. When she mentions the story again, it is the god himself whom she blames, and feels no restraint in doing so. Although her advice to disregard all prophecies springs from her love for Oedipus, this is no explanation of her manifest impiety. The oracle is still the same, and it might have been easier to

convince Oedipus of its untruth if she had again held the priests responsible and not the god. She is so full of love for her husband that she neglects and even despises the gods. And this is ample proof that, in her emotions as well as her brain, she has no religion. Her life is an unparalleled tragedy indeed; but she has no religion. Her life is an unparalleled tragedy indeed; but she is at the same time truly impious. Her public prayer to Apollo is no more than an act of conventional duty, as her own words confirm. When the news of the death of Polybus comes, she does not thank the gods. With even more scorn than before she denounces the prophecies of the gods. She tries to allay Oedipus's fear by explaining away the oracle with a rationalistic allusion to certain dreams* and denies any belief in divine signs. Her impiety reaches its climax when she says that human beings have nothing to fear because their life is determined by the changes of Tyche; no foresight is possible, and to live at random is the best way to live. She proclaims the law of lawlessness and complete disregard of the gods and their warnings.

In a Moral Sense Neither Guilty Nor Innocent

Jocasta's belief ends where Oedipus's ends too, in replacing the gods by Tyche, in putting sceptical fatalism in the place of piety. But Jocasta always proceeds to the extreme possibilities when Oedipus is still reluctant and restrained; however, he always tries to comply with her thoughts. Whatever explanation may be accepted for Jocasta's attitude to the gods, it will not explain what is behind and beyond it. She cannot be truly pious, and her scepticism is necessary because she is bound to perish on account of her incest. She shares Oedipus's life and tragedy as the one person who loves him most and who is most loved by him. She, too, is in a moral sense neither guilty nor innocent. What she shows and stands for is that they both belong to a world of man-made standards. Piety is not sufficient, if it is not the unconditional acceptance of one's fate at the hands of the gods.

* This reference to dreams is an amazing anticipation of modern psychoanalysis.

The Use of Tragic Irony in *Oedipus Rex*

The Meaning of Tragic Irony

Tragic irony is the name given to a device used originally in ancient Greek tragedy, and later almost in all tragedies, whereby a character's words and actions are seen to be wholly contradictory to the actual situation as known to some of the other characters or to the audience. Irony consists essentially in the contrast of the two aspects of the same remark or situation. A remark made by a character in a play may have one meaning for him and another meaning for some of the other characters and the audience, or one meaning for the speaker and the other characters and another meaning for the audience. Similarly, a situation in a play may have a double significance in the sense that a disaster or calamity may be foreseen by the audience while the characters concerned may be ignorant of it. The use of irony, whether it be in words or in a situation, heightens the tragic effect. Irony was used with striking effect by Sophocles in his plays.

Tragic Irony in Oedipus's Initial Proclamation

Oedipus Rex is replete with tragic irony. In fact, tragic irony is to be found in this play in most of the speeches and in most of the situations. There are many occasions on which the audience is aware of the facts while the speaker—Oedipus, or Jocasta, or the Corinthian messenger, or the Chorus, is ignorant of those facts. The awareness of the audience (and some character or characters) on the one hand, and the ignorance of the speaker and some other character or characters on the other hand, present a contrast which lends an increased emphasis to a tragic fact or to the ultimate tragic outcome. The very proclamation to Oedipus, for instance, that he will make a determined effort to trace the murderer of Laius and the curse that Oedipus utters upon the killer and upon those sheltering the criminal, possess a tragic irony in view of the audience's knowledge that Oedipus himself will ultimately prove to be Laius's murderer. In this connection it may be pointed out that the Greek audiences of those times knew beforehand the myth pertaining to Oedipus. In other words, the audiences of those times had a prior knowledge of the facts of which Oedipus himself, speaking on the stage, was ignorant. Even the modern audience is well-acquainted with the myth of Oedipus before going to witness a performance of the play in the theatre, and the modern reader knows the story of the play in advance, so that the irony underlying Oedipus's proclamation is not lost upon either the audience or the reader. But, even when an audience or a reader does not have prior knowledge of the story of

the play, this speech of Oedipus, like several others which follow, will be seen to possess tragic irony in the light of the later developments in the play. In other words, at a second reading or at a second visit to the theatre, the reader or the audience is bound to perceive the tragic irony of Oedipus's expression of his anger against the offender and his resolve to bring him to book. Oedipus proclaims that no home or house in Thebes is to provide shelter to the guilty man and that the gods will curse those who disobey his command in this respect. Thus, without knowing the real meaning of his words, Oedipus announces the sentence of banishment against the murderer and heightens the tragic effect of the discovery which comes towards the end of the play. Oedipus does not know that he himself is to become the victim of the punishment which he is proclaiming, but we, the audience, know it. In this contrast between Oedipus's ignorance and our knowledge of the true fact lies the tragic irony.

The Tragic Irony in the Scene of Quarrel Between Oedipus and Teiresias

The scene between Oedipus and Teiresias is fraught with tragic irony throughout. Teiresias is the prophet who knows everything, while Oedipus is the guilty man who does not know himself as such. Teiresias would not like to disclose the secret that he knows, but Oedipus quickly loses his temper with the prophet, thus irritating him and provoking him to say things which the prophet never wanted to say. Teiresias tells Oedipus that the guilty man he is seeking is he himself, and that he is living in a sinful union with the one he loves. The significance of these words is totally lost upon Oedipus. The accusations of Teiresias enrage him, and he insults the prophet by calling him a shameless, brainless, sightless, and senseless sot. A keener irony lies in the fact that, Teiresias, who is physically blind, knows the real truth, while Oedipus, who physically possesses normal eyesight, is at this stage in the story totally blind to that truth. Oedipus mocks at the blindness of Teiresias, in this way showing his own inner blindness. The irony here is not limited to the contrast between the blind but knowledgeable Teiresias, and Oedipus who, having his eyesight, is yet blind. There is irony also in the contrast between what Oedipus truly is and what he at this moment thinks himself to be. Actually he is ignorant of the facts, but to Teiresias he boasts of his exceptional intelligence, citing his past victory over the Sphinx as evidence of it. The predictions, that Teiresias goes on to make regarding the fate in store for Oedipus, also possess irony in the sense that, while we know their tragic import, Oedipus treats them as the ravings of a madman whom he dismisses from his presence with insulting words. These predictions are terrible but they become even more awful when we realise that they will prove to be true and valid. Every word of these predictions will be fulfilled. Teiresias warns Oedipus that the killer of Laius will ultimately find himself blind, destitute, an exile, a beggar, a brother and a father at the same time to the children he loves, a son and a husband to the woman who bore him, a father-killer and father-supplanter. Oedipus, of course, does not have the least notion that these

threats have any reference to himself, though the prophet has at the same time clearly called him the killer he is searching for. Even the Chorus, ignorant of the facts, refuses to believe what Teiresias has said about Oedipus. After a few moments of perplexity, the Chorus dismisses the warnings and predictions of Teiresias. Thus, in this scene, both Oedipus and the Chorus are unaware of the truth while Teiresias is fully aware of it, and so is the audience.

Tragic Irony in Oedipus's Tyrannical Attitude Towards Creon

Tragic irony is also to be found in the scene with Creon. Creon begs Oedipus not to think him a traitor and not to pass the sentence of death or banishment against him. But Oedipus, blinded by his authority and his anger, shows himself relentless. This situation is ironical when viewed in the light of the final scene in which it is Oedipus who becomes the suppliant and Creon who is the King. In the final scene the roles are reversed. There Oedipus begs Creon to look after his daughters, and entreats him to pass the order of banishment against him. Creon, of course, does not show himself to be arbitrary or unrelenting in that scene: Creon is a moderate type of man. Thus, although Oedipus makes a display of his temper and his authority as the monarch in the earlier scene, we can perceive the irony in that situation in the light of the final scene. The pathos of the final scene is in this way intensified.

Tragic Irony in Jocasta's Account of the Oracle

Then there is the scene with Jocasta. Here both Oedipus and Jocasta appear as persons ignorant of the true facts. Therefore, we the audience, who are aware of those facts, experience a deep sorrow at the fate which is going to overtake both these characters. Jocasta is sceptical of oracles. No man possesses the secret of divination, she says. And as a proof of the falsity of oracles, she gives an account of what she and her husband did to the child to whom she had given birth and, who, according to the oracle, was to kill his father. There is palpable irony in Jocasta's unbelief in oracles and her citing as evidence the very case which is to prove the truth of the oracle received by her and the late Laius. This irony deepens Jocasta's tragedy.

Tragic Irony in Oedipus's Account of the Oracle

There is irony also in the account of his life which Oedipus gives to Jocasta. Oedipus thinks himself to be the son of Polybus and Merope: he fled from Corinth after the oracle had told him of the crimes he would commit; he has all along been under the impression that he has avoided committing the crimes foretold by the oracle. But all the time Oedipus has been unknowingly performing certain actions leading to the fulfilment of the prophecies of the oracle. The greatest irony of the play lies in the fact that the actions of Oedipus lead to the fulfilment of those very prophecies which he had been striving to belie, just as King Laius had earlier taken desperate but futile measures to prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy which had been communicated to him by the oracle.

Tragic Irony in the Scene with the Corinthian Messenger

When the Corinthian messenger arrives with the news of Polybus's death, Jocasta gets another opportunity to mock at the oracles. "Where are you now, divine prognostications?" she asks, without realizing that her mockery will turn against herself. There is irony also in the simple remark of the messenger that Jocasta is the "true consort" of a man like Oedipus. Neither the messenger nor Jocasta knows the awful meaning of these words which the audience understands. Jocasta tells Oedipus that the news brought by the Corinthian messenger proves the hollowness of oracles because Polybus, whom Oedipus believed to be his father, has died a natural death. Jocasta makes an exultant, though brief, speech on the desirability of living at random and on mother-marrying as merely a figment of the imagination. Jocasta makes this speech only a few moments before the real truth dawns upon her. The Corinthian, who wanted to free Oedipus of his fear of marrying his mother, ends by revealing, unknowingly, the fact that Jocasta's husband, Oedipus, is really her son, although this revelation is at this stage confined to Jocasta. The tragic irony in this situation and in what is said by the Corinthian and Jocasta in this scene is evident.

Tragic Irony is a Song by the Chorus

The song of the Chorus after Jocasta has left, in a fit of grief and sorrow, is full of tragic irony. The Chorus visualises Oedipus as the offspring of a union between some god and a mountain-nymph. The Chorus thereby pays a tribute to what it thinks to be the divine parentage of Oedipus. There is a big contrast between this supposition of the Chorus and the actual reality. The arrival of the Theban shepherd is the prelude to the final discovery, the point in which the climax of the tragedy is reached.

No Room for Tragic Irony in the Concluding Part of the Play

After the discovery there is hardly any room for tragic irony and, accordingly, the concluding part of the play contains little or no tragic irony. This concluding part consists of a long account of the self-murder and the self-blinding, a dialogue between Oedipus and the Chorus, and a scene between Oedipus and Creon including the brief lament by Oedipus on the wretched condition of his daughters who have been brought to him. The concluding portion of the play is deeply moving and poignant, but there could hardly be any tragic irony in it, because all the facts are now known to all those concerned.

II

Tragic Irony in the Play

Oedipus Rex bristles with tragic irony. It opposes Oedipus—possessed of rumour, opinion, or error—against those who know (Teiresias, the Theban shepherd, both of them trying to withhold information because they know it to be bad while Oedipus insistently goes plunging forward, armed as he is with

his native wit). Where characters themselves are not omniscient, the audience is. The audience know the gist of the story and can be surprised only in the means by which the necessary ends are achieved. They know, for instance, that Oedipus is, in all sincerity, telling falsehood when he says: "I shall speak, as a stranger to the whole question and stranger to the action." The falsehood is, however, qualified in the term stranger: the stranger who met and killed King Laius, the stranger who met and married Queen Jocasta, the stranger who was no true stranger at all. At the outset, he says: "For I know well that all of you are sick, but though you are sick, there's none of you who is so sick as I." Here he is, indeed, speaking the truth, but more truth than he knows, because he is using sickness only in a metaphorical sense while actually it is true of him in a literal sense. He only refers to his mental distress as a King worried by the plague, but the audience knows much more than that and can only wonder when the shock of the revelation will come to Oedipus.

Irony in the Inversion of the Action

In addition to this irony of detail, there is a larger irony in the inversion of the whole action. The homeless wanderer by delivering the city of Thebes from the Sphinx and marrying Jocasta became a King in fact and then was shown to be a King by right, but this revelation turned him once more into a homeless wanderer. But the wanderer, who had once gone bright-eyed with his strong traveller's staff, now uses the staff to feel the way before him, because he is now old, and blind.

The Role of the "Helpers"

The reversed pattern is seen again in the fact that the malignant oracles have their darkness moment just before they come clear. Jocasta's words mocking the prophecy of the gods are echoed and amplified in Oedipus's typical tyrant-speech of unbelief. The role of the helpers is another example. Sophocles provides at least one helper, or rescuer, for every act. The appeal in the prologue is to Oedipus, himself a rescuer in the past. Oedipus appeals to Creon who comes from and represents Apollo and Delphi. It is as a rescuer that Teiresias called Jocasta intervenes to help. So does the Corinthian messenger, and the last helper, the Theban shepherd, is the true and original rescuer. Those who do not know the reality are eager to help; those who know are reluctant. But all the helpers alike push Oedipus over the edge into disaster.